

Swept off your Feet

Beyond Worship-as-Usual

Connecting with God for a Strong Finish

CHAPTER 8

Worshippers: Who, How, and Why

Compiling the Data

Understanding the biblical record diminishes false assumptions associated with worship. It replaces cultural bias with accurate knowledge and our religious preference with an informed response.

The following data tables list worshippers from the Old and New Testaments. Four tables indicate how often and by what means individuals and groups worshiped. A fifth table specifies occasions that prompted a response of worship. For consistency sake, the New American Standard Bible (NAS) serves as the English translation, except where noted otherwise. All data rely on Hebrew and Greek words categorized from the biblical record.

This data focuses exclusively on the individuals and groups that worshiped God. It does not address the worship of idols, demons, Satan, or false gods.

Individual Old Testament Worshippers

Spread over 20 occasions, the Old Testament describes 12 individuals worshipping God. Abram and Abraham count as one person as do Jacob and Israel. All but three occasions specify bowing or falling facedown as their expression of worship. The three exceptions include

Jacob who leaned on the top of his staff and Samuel and Saul who worshiped in an unspecified manner.

The Bible also describes Abram twice and Ezekiel four times falling on their face before an appearance of the Lord. In each case, the original text used the Hebrew word *naphal*, which means to fall instead of *shachah*, which means to worship. Nonetheless, gestures expressed by Abram and Ezekiel seem consistent with a response of reverence characteristic to worship.

In some situations, individuals fell on their face before God for reasons other than worship. Sometimes they bowed as a cultural courtesy or in fear. At other times, they bowed to express gratitude or to solicit help. This table includes bowing when specified as a response of worship.



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Individual Old Testament Worshipers				
Worshiper	Times	Hebrew	Gesture	NAS Verse
Job	1	Shachah	Fell to the ground	Job 1:20
Abram	2*	Naphal	Fell on his face	Gen 17:3,17
Abraham	1	Shachah	Bowed himself to the earth	Gen 18:2-3
Eliezer	2	Shachah	Bowed low	Gen 24:26
		Shachah	Bowed himself to the ground	Gen 24:52
Jacob	1	Shachah	Leaning on the top of his staff	Heb 11:21
Israel	1	Shachah	Bowed in worship at the head of his bed	Gen 47:31
Moses	1	Shachah	Bowed low	Exo 34:8
Joshua	1	Shachah	Fell on his face and bowed down	Jos 5:14
Samuel	1	Shachah	Unspecified	1 Sam 1:28
Saul	1	Shachah		1 Sam 15:31
David	2	Shachah	In the house of the Lord	2 Sam 12:20
		Shachah	Bowed on his bed	1 Kin 1:47
Jehoshaphat	1	Shachah	Bowed his head with his face to the ground	2 Chr 20:18
Hezekiah	1	Shachah	Bowed down	2 Chr 29:29-30
Ezekiel	4*	Naphal	Fell on his face	Ezekiel 1:28 Ezekiel 3:23 Ezekiel 43:3 Ezekiel 44:4

** Indicates falling or bowing but not translated from a word commonly rendered worship, such as shachah.*

Groups of Old Testament Worshipers

The Old Testament describes six groups that worshiped God on 12 occasions. Nine of these occasions involve the Israelites or Judah. All but three of the nine specify bowing or falling facedown as an expression of worship.

Before Jesus was born, every gesture of worship specified in the Bible involves bowing or falling facedown, except perhaps when Jacob leaned on his staff. On six occasions, the Old Testament mentions wor-

ship without specifying a gesture. These unspecified accounts generate a zone of uncertainty, which prevents us from establishing a rigid dogma concerning how we should express worship.

Groups of Old Testament Worshipers					
Worshippers		Times	Hebrew	Gesture	NAS Verse
Abraham and Isaac		Intention	Shachah	Unspecified	Gen 22:5
Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 Elders		Implied	Shachah	Unspecified at a distance	Exo 24:1
Israelites 7 Times	Pre-Exodus	1	Shachah	Bowed low	Exo 4:31
	Pre-Passover	1	Shachah		Exo 12:27
	In the Wilderness	1	Shachah	Unspecified at tent entrances	Exo 33:10
	David**	1	Shachah	Bowed low	1 Chr 29:20
	Solomon**	1	Shachah	Bowed with face to the ground	2 Chr 7:3
	Ezra** Nehemiah**	2	Shachah	Bowed with face to the ground	Neh 8:6
			Shachah	Unspecified	Neh 9:3
Judah 2 Times	Jehoshaphat	1	Shachah	Fell down before the Lord	2 Chr 20:18
	Hezekiah	1	Shachah	Bowed down	2 Chr 29:28-30
Hannah and Elkanah		1	Shachah	Before the Lord	1 Sa 1:19
The Heavenly Host		1	Shachah	Bows down	Neh 9:6

*** Indicates an individual named for context purposes only. The biblical text does not describe them expressing worship with the group.*

Individual New Testament Worshipers

Before Jesus rose from the dead, the New Testament rarely mentions individual worshipers. It only describes three persons generating, what may be construed as a gesture of worship. In one instance, a man afflicted by a legion of demons bowed down before Jesus. In another, the original text does not mention a specific gesture by a man that received his sight from Jesus. In a third case, a Samaritan man fell on his face giving thanks to Jesus for healing him of leprosy. This response

leans toward gratitude instead of worship since Luke chose the Greek word *pipto* rather than *proskuneo* to describe the gesture and it is unclear whether the man venerated Jesus as God.

Individual New Testament Worshipers				
Worshiper	Times	Greek	Gesture	NAS Verse
Gerasene Man	1	Proskuneo	Bowed down	Mark 5:6
Blind Man	1	Proskuneo	Said, "Lord I believe" then he worshiped	John 9:38
Samaritan Leper	1*	Pipto	Fell on his face	Luke 17:16

** Indicates falling or bowing but not translated from a word commonly rendered worship, such as proskuneo*

Groups of New Testament Worshipers

The New Testament describes seven groups of worshipers on 16 occasions. All but three specify bowing or falling facedown as an expression of worship. Three times, the original text mentions falling but does not use a Greek word normally rendered as worship. The Bible records only one expression of worship by Jesus' disciples before His resurrection and three after He rose from the dead.

On six occasions in heaven, twenty-four elders fell facedown to express a consistent precedent for worship.

Groups of New Testament Worshipers					
Worshippers		Times	Greek	Gesture	NAS Verse
The Magi		1	Proskuneo	Fell to the ground	Mat 2:11
Samaritan Fathers		1	Proskuneo	Unspecified	John 4:20
Unclean spirits		1*	Prospipto	Fell down	Mark 3:11
Disciples of Jesus	In a boat At sea	1	Proskuneo	Saying, "You are certainly God's Son"	Mat 14:33
	After Jesus' Resurrection	1	Proskuneo	Unspecified	Mat 28:17
	At Jesus' Ascension	1	Proskuneo		Luke 24:52
Mary Magdalene with Mary (mother of James)		1	Proskuneo	Grasped Jesus' feet after Resurrection	Mat 28:9
The Angels		1	Proskuneo	Fell on their face	Rev 7:11
Twenty-four Elders in Heaven		5	Proskuneo	Fell down or Fell on their face	Rev 4:10
			Proskuneo		Rev 5:14
			Proskuneo		Rev 7:11
			Proskuneo		Rev 11:16
			Proskuneo		Rev 19:4
		1*	Pipto	Fell down	Rev 5:8
Four Living Creatures		2	Proskuneo	Fell down	Rev 7:11
			Proskuneo	Fell down and worshiped saying, "Amen. Hallelujah"	Rev 19:4
		1*	Pipto	Fell down	Rev 5:8

** Indicates falling or bowing but not translated from a word commonly rendered worship, such as proskuneo*

Occasions that Prompted a Response of Worship

The Following bar graph summarizes occasions in the Bible that prompted a response of worship.



On seven occasions in heaven, angels, elders, and living creatures unanimously established a precedent for facedown worship. On earth, circumstances in six categories prompted a response of worship on 38 occasions.

Two accounts refer to worship without describing the act. Prompted by ulterior motives, Saul worshiped God in an unspecified manner at Gilgal in the presence of Israel, its elders, and Samuel. At Jacob's well, a Samaritan outcast announced to Jesus that her relatives had worshiped God in an unspecified manner on Mount Gerizim, as an alternative to worshipping Him in Jerusalem.

The following table details occasions that prompted a response of worship. It identifies the individuals and groups who offered such a response, its frequency, and the associated scripture references.

Occasions that Prompted a Response of Worship

	Prompt	Times	Hebrew or Greek	Worshippers	Verse
Heavenly Situations	God's Creation	1	Shachah	Heavenly Host	Neh 9:6
	Divine Encounters in Heaven's Throne Room	4	Proskuneo	Elders	Rev 4:10
			Proskuneo	Angels	Rev 5:14
			Proskuneo	Living Creatures	Rev 7:11 Rev 19:4
	Worthy to do so, the Lamb takes the Scroll	1*	Pipto	Living Creatures with Elders	Rev 5:8
Final Trumpet Judgment	1	Proskuneo	Elders	Rev 11:16	
God's Presence On Earth	The Lord Appeared	1*	Naphal	Abram	Gen 17:3
		2	Shachah	Abraham	Gen 18:2-3
			Shachah	Moses	Exo 34:8
	The Resurrected Christ	3	Proskuneo	Mary Magdalene with Another Mary	Mat 28:9
			Proskuneo	Disciples	Mat 28:17
Proskuneo			Luk 24:52		
Supernatural Manifestations On Earth	Pillar and Cloud during Israel's Exodus	1	Shachah	Israelites	Exo 33:10
	Fire and Glory at Solomon's Temple	1	Shachah		2 Chr 7:3
	Captain of the Host	1	Shachah	Joshua	Joshua 5:14
	God's Glory	4*	Naphal	Ezekiel	Eze 1:28 Eze 3:23 Eze 43:3 Eze 44:4
	Jesus Walks on Water	1	Proskuneo	Disciples	Mat 14:33

Occasions that Prompted a Response of Worship					
Prompt		Times	Hebrew or Greek	Worshippers	Verse
Circumstances Involving Children	Promise of Children	1*	Naphal	Abram	Gen 17:1-3
	Sacrificing Isaac	1	Shachah	Abraham	Gen 22:2,5
	Protection of Firstborn	1	Shachah	Israelites	Exo 12:27
	News of death	2	Shachah	Job	Job 1:20
			Shachah	David	2 Sa 12:20
	Blessing David's Son	1	Shachah		1 Ki 1:47
	Blessing Joseph's Sons	1	Proskuneo	Jacob	Heb 11:21
	Blessing in response to prayer for conception	1	Shachah	Hannah And Elkanah	1 Sa 1:19
	Dedicated to the Lord	1	Shachah	Samuel	1 Sa 1:28
Finding Christ Child	1	Proskuneo	Magi	Mat 2:11	
God's Promises	A Covenant and Fatherhood	1*	Naphal	Abram	Gen 17:1-3
	Burial in Canaan	1	Shachah	Israel	Gen 47:31
	Egyptian Deliverance	1	Shachah	Israelites	Exo 4:31
	Passover Protection	1	Shachah		Exo 12:27
	Military Victory	2	Shachah	Jehoshaphat and Judah	2 Chr 20:18
Shachah			Gideon	Jud 7:15	
Gratitude	Guidance finding bride for Abraham's son	2	Shachah	Eliezer	Gen 24:26
			Shachah		Gen 24:52
	Healing from Leprosy	1*	Pipto	Samaritan Leper	Luke 17:16
	Receiving sight and faith	1	Proskuneo	Healed Blind Man	John 9:38
National Gatherings	Blessing the Lord	2	Shachah	Israelites	1 Chr 29:20
			Shachah		Neh 8:6
	Reading the Law	1	Shachah		Neh 9:3
	Establishing The House of God	1	Shachah	Judah	2 Chr 29: 28-30
	Mixed Motives	1	Shachah	King Saul	1 Sa 15:31
	Alternate to Jerusalem	1	Proskuneo	Samaritans	John 4:20

* Indicates falling or bowing but not translated from a word commonly rendered as worship, such as shachah or proskuneo.

The Bible stresses a consistent association between worship and bowing. Both Hebrew and Greek words confirm this emphasis as most worshipers bowed or fell facedown to express their worship to God. Besides bowing, other activities occurred occasionally in the same context with worship. These activities include offerings, speaking, singing, and serving.

Upcoming chapters describe how often and in what context each associated activity converges with worship in the biblical record. In addition, they discuss how the Bible associates worship with gratitude, love, and adoration.

God grants considerable latitude to everyone offering Him worship. He understands their attitudes and intentions whenever, wherever, and however they attempt to express them. Nonetheless, the Bible does not portray worship as a catchall phrase. Its aim is direct and its message is clear. Worshiping God involves a deportment of reverence based on explicit veneration.

Bowing or Falling Down

Mentioned in the Bible 32 times in reference to God

Individuals and groups alike responded with facedown reverence when they encountered the truth about God. Usually, they fell prostrate to convey homage. Facedown worshipers from the Old Testament include: Job, Abraham, Eliezer, Jacob, Israel, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites, Aaron, Joshua, Gideon, David, unnamed elders, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, all Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Hezekiah, Levites, Ezra with all the people, Ezekiel, and Daniel. In the New Testament, the Magi, the angelic host, the 4 living creatures and 24 elders in heaven all bowed down explicitly to express their worship. When the resurrected Christ met Mary Magdalene and another Mary, they *“took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.”*¹

¹ Matthew 28:9 NAS

Bible translators describe the response of worship by various individuals and groups. They either:

- “Fell” down in worship
- “Bowed” down in worship
- Worshiped God without any mention of falling or bowing

Normally Bible translators render the Hebrew word *shachah* and the Greek word *proskuneo* as worship. Sometimes however, these words are rendered “fall” or “bow down” instead. Occasionally, English Bibles insert the word worship into a verse though its Hebrew or Greek equivalent is absent from the original text. The Good News Translation (GNT) embellishes Genesis 4:26 by adding the words “in worship”.

*Seth had a son whom he named Enosh. It was then that people began using the Lord's holy name **in worship**.* (GNT)

The NAS translates this verse as follows:

To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of the LORD. (NAS)

Bowing without Worshiping God

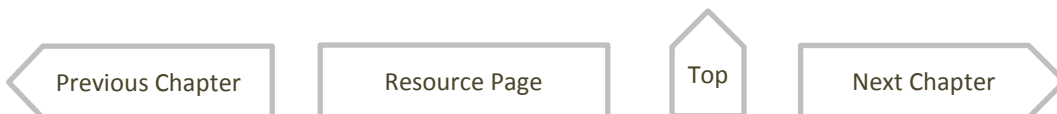
The Bible describes individuals and groups falling or bowing for cultural reasons other than worship. Some fell, bowed, or knelt while expressing an urgent need, a plea for help, love, grief, gratitude, repentance, or terror. In each of these accounts, the biblical text does not specify any association with worship.

Sometimes individuals and groups bowed to honor officials of superior rank. Social esteem motivated this act, albeit from tradition and in some cases from fear of punishment.

Using the Hebrew word *shachah*, some individuals in the Bible bowed, knelt, or prostrated themselves without any clear association to God or worship. For instance, subjects bowed before Kings. Bathsheba bowed before David. After his royal coronation, King Solomon bowed before his mother Bathsheba.

When Balaam saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the road with sword drawn he *“bowed all the way to the ground”*.² The word “bowed” here comes from the Hebrew word *qadad* instead of from a word normally translated as worship. At other times when the Bible uses *qadad*, a word like *shachah* designates the act as worship. For example, Eliezer *“bowed low [qadad] and worshiped [shachah] the LORD.”*³

In the New Testament, Peter, James, and John *“fell [pipto] facedown to the ground and were terrified”* when they heard the Father’s voice on the Mount of Transfiguration.⁴ Roman soldiers bowed [*proskuneo*] in mock worship before Jesus.⁵ Some individuals bowed down to Jesus as a great person, strictly from a sense of cultural respect. Others bowed according to their custom, requesting a special favor when in great need. When a Samaritan man covered with leprosy *“saw Jesus, he fell [pipto] on his face and implored Him, saying, ‘Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean’.”*⁶ After being healed, this man *“fell [pipto] on his face at His [Jesus] feet, giving thanks to Him.”*⁷ These individuals bowed from a posture of terror, mockery, cultural respect, request, and gratitude. Their attitudes, as stated, fell short of venerating Jesus as God.



² Numbers 22:31 NIV

³ Genesis 24:26 NAS

⁴ Matthew 17:6 NAS

⁵ Luke 8:28 and Mark 15:19

⁶ Luke 5:12 NAS

⁷ Luke 17:16 NAS